



Zen and the Mindfulness Industry

Geoff Dawson

Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Zen Buddhism is a meditation tradition that bears similarities and differences to mindfulness that is practiced in clinical settings and in life coaching. I refer to all these nonspiritual or nonreligious applications of mindfulness as secular mindfulness. While both practices emphasize living in the present moment, this article sets out to explain that Zen Buddhism (commonly abbreviated as just Zen) is focused on spiritual awakening, while secular mindfulness is more instrumental and focused on improving mental and physical health and enhancing performance activities. This article also addresses some of the negative influences impacting secular mindfulness, such as narcissism and commercialization, and addresses some of the challenges and difficulties that arise from meditation and mindfulness practices. This article highlights the difference of mindfulness being offered by facilitators such as Zen teachers, who have a personal practice grounded in years of training that is integrated into the Buddhist tradition, and the risk of mindfulness being taught by professionals such as clinicians and life coaches who are not adequately experienced in understanding the nuances of sustained attention to present-moment experience. This article strongly recommends the importance of personal practice for psychologists who use mindfulness in their professional work.

Keywords: Zen Buddhism, secular mindfulness, narcissism, commercialization, personal practice

In this article, I outline how the aim of Zen, in accordance with its Buddhist roots, is to recognize that much of psychological suffering is based on a false sense of a separate self and that through the practice of sitting meditation, the practice of mindfulness in everyday life, and the practice of a moral code of conduct that emphasizes nonviolence and nonegotism, one may cultivate insight into this false self and experience a more liberating, intimate, and playful way of being in the world. Secular mindfulness has recognized the many benefits of mindfulness practice, drawn mainly, but not entirely, from the various Buddhist traditions, and, by making it more accessible and nonreligious, has popularized its practice. However, it has been selective in what it has replicated. Zen practice goes hand in hand with a moral code of nonviolence and nonegotism, and I believe this has not been adequately transferred to the secular setting. This moral code extends the practice of mindfulness into mindfulness of others and the environment, not just mindfulness of one's own inner

Some of the case material was presented orally at a conference and workshop for mental health professionals, but it has not been posted on Listserv or public websites.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Geoff Dawson, 88 River Road West, Lane Cove, New South Wales 2066, Australia. E-mail: geoffreydawson@bigpond.com

moment-to-moment experience. Zen practice also involves a lifelong commitment to practice that requires undertaking multiple meditation intensive retreats, regular daily practice, being a member of a Zen school or community, and having an ongoing relationship with a teacher to test and deepen one's insight and spiritual maturity. The standards required by trainers of secular mindfulness are far less rigorous. I argue that this difference in training standards often leads to trainers of secular mindfulness, including psychologists, not being adequately equipped to understand the nuances of mindfulness practice as well as its possible negative effects. The fact that it is more accessible and popularized also leads to it being vulnerable to corruption by narcissistic attitudes and commercialization. I put forward the view that deep commitment to personal practice by secular mindfulness trainers is essential to prevent mindfulness from becoming a shallow fad that is lacking in substance to transform human suffering.

Biography

My interest in Zen Buddhism and Western psychology dates back 45 years ago to 1975 when I became a practicing Zen student and a recently graduated psychologist. I was 25 then. I am now nearly 70 years old. An aspiration to integrate these two disciplines has always been at the center of my life's work. The double-edged question at the heart of my inquiry has always been this: how are Zen Buddhism and Western psychology similar, and how are they different? This is also the approach that is adopted by the Australian Association of Buddhist Counselors and Psychotherapists, which I helped found. I am also one of the founders of Zen in Australia, and I have been teaching it formally for about 25 years. My lineage is in the Ordinary Mind Zen School founded by Charlotte Joko Beck of the Zen Center of San Diego.

Mindfulness in Zen and Secular Mindfulness

Mindfulness in Zen

The term mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word *sati* (Hanh, 1991/1976, p. 7). Pali is the original language of Buddhist psychology, and *sati* is a core teaching of this 2,500-year-old meditation tradition. *Sati* means "to bring to mind." Hanh defined mindfulness as "keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality" (Hanh, 1991/1976, p. 11). Sitting meditation is considered by most Buddhists to be the best way, but not the only way, to cultivate mindfulness. This was the primary practice of the Buddha himself.

The Zen practice that I teach that bears the closest similarity to secular mindfulness is called *shikantaza* in Japanese—literally, just sitting (not thinking, not daydreaming, not analyzing, not contemplating, not trying to achieve anything at all—only sitting.) The practice of mindfulness in Zen meditation could be described as keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality of just sitting. To extend this concept into everyday mindfulness, it is keeping one's consciousness alive to the act of just walking, just eating, just laughing, just crying.

However, the aspiration of *shikantaza* in Zen is not quite the same as secular mindfulness as I understand it. Dogen Zenji, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, wrote, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget

the self is to be actualized by the myriad things” (Dogen, 1985, p. 70). Secular mindfulness is a practice of the first statement but does not necessarily progress to include the second and third statements—and perhaps has no ambition to do so. There is no doubt there is much benefit in studying the self through mindfulness, as all the research into mindfulness continues to discover, but in Zen, we refer to the calmness that this limited practice cultivates as the consolation prize. One may cultivate a calmer and more kindly acceptance of one’s thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and emotional life, but the sense of a separate self remains. The deeper sense of fulfillment comes from forgetting the self and being embraced wholeheartedly by the intimate experience of suchness—life as it is. This is referred to as the awakened life, where the false sense of a separate self has fallen away and is replaced with a deeper sense of connection to the whole of life.

The shift from a calm mindfulness of self to the vibrancy of the awakened life requires a very deep letting go of attachment to results and personal ambition, including spiritual ambition. It is a radical act of surrender, like jumping out of an airplane and free falling through the empty sky—only you realize there is no ground to crash into. A beginner’s experience of this insight, *kensho*, or a deeper, more mature experience, *satori*, is not something that is likely to occur in the brief, pragmatic, goal-directed atmosphere of a mindfulness workshop where the intention is to learn a new technique or gain a qualification. Rather, it is more likely to occur through a long-term commitment to a teacher, a meditation group, and a particular teaching, whether it is Zen, Vipassana, Tibetan Buddhism, or other spiritual traditions such as Christianity or Sufism.

To give a more comprehensive understanding of the awakening experience of *kensho*, Austin (1998) described his own experience while waiting on a train station in London:

The scene is utterly empty, stripped of every last extension of an I-Me-Mine. . . . It’s vision of profound, implicit, perfect reality continues for a few seconds, perhaps as many as three to five. Then it subtly blends into a second series of lancinating insights. Within this second wave are three more indivisible themes.

- This is the eternal state of affairs. It has always been just this way, remains just so, and will continue just so indefinitely.
- There is nothing more to do. The train station in and of itself, and the whole rest of this world are already totally complete and intrinsically valid. They require no further intervention (on the part of whoever is remotely inferred).
- There is nothing whatever to fear. (pp. 537–538)

Austin refers to the cultivation of calm states of mind as the turning in of absorptions (Austin, 1998, p. 467) and *kensho/satori* experiences as the turning out of awakenings (Austin, 1998, p. 519). Both are important aspects of Zen practice. Absorption is cultivated through long dedication to sitting meditation that sets up the favorable conditions for spontaneous awakenings to occur. Austin hypothesizes that absorptions and awakenings involve different neurological processes. He sees absorptions, which are slow and gradual experiences, to be associated with opioid beta-endorphin activity in the brain (Austin, 1998, p. 507) and awakenings, which are sudden experiences associated with quick-acting acetylcholine and glutamate activity in the brain (Austin, 1998, p. 614).

Zen Precepts—Mindfulness of Others

At a training level, another distinction between Zen and secular mindfulness is that Zen involves the formal practice of taking up vows of nonviolence and nonegotism. These

are called The Ten Precepts (Fischer, 2011).¹ They go hand in hand with mindful meditation because they both work toward dissolving the false sense of separateness that places the self-cherishing ego above the interests of others. In other words, it would be pulling in opposite directions to be practicing meditation to dissolve the separate sense of self while indulging the ego in everyday life. Hence, the precepts address the way we relate mindfully and empathically to others, not just to ourselves.

While passing reference may be given to these values of nonviolence and nonegotism in some secular mindfulness programs, they are not formally undertaken as a central tenet or examined closely as personalized vows. My understanding is that moral precepts are not included in secular mindfulness programs because (a) secular mindfulness is not defined in this way, (b) it would look too much like religion and less like the scientific paradigm that it wishes to identify with, and (c) it would be too confronting to some of the narcissistic characteristics that may be found in mainstream popular culture and would not sell well.

Nonattainment in Zen

The Japanese Zen teacher Katagiri Roshi humorously described Zen practice as “fishing with a straight hook” (Port, 2009). In Zen meditation, there is nothing to catch and nothing to get one’s hooks into and claim as a personal achievement, whether we call it enlightenment, happiness, or insight. There is no pursuing of any results that can be pinned down. From the worldly point of view, this is a very foolish activity indeed; why would you want to go fishing if you are not intending to catch fish? Paradoxically, realizing that there is absolutely nothing to catch and that everything is perfect the way it is is the awakening experience itself. It opens up a real transformation in the way we live our lives, from self-centered wanting and taking to life-centered giving and receiving. The awakened person is no longer caught up in defending a false separate self or attacking others that may threaten its identity and, therefore, drops below the surface level of fight/flight survival into a more joyful and loving relationship with life. This can be depicted, for example, in the playful Zen koan “Wu-tsu’s Buffalo Passes Through the Window” (Mumon, 1991). Wu-tsu said, “It is like a buffalo that passes through a window. Its head, horns, and four legs pass through. Why can’t its tail pass through as well?” (Mumon, 1991, p. 231). If a Zen student can give an appropriate response to this question, they can demonstrate to the teacher that they are no longer taking their rigid self-identity quite so seriously.

The principle of no gain is central to Zen training. It involves letting go of the grasping expectation of having a positive experience in mindfulness practice or making progress. Expectation is not an easy monkey to get off your back. It takes years of practice to let it go. Mindfulness requires constancy and patience because attachment to being immediately rewarded for our efforts and making progress is deeply engrained within us.

The insight of Zen is that there is nowhere to progress to and that up until the time we have started to wake up, we have deluded ourselves, like most other religious or psychologically minded human beings, into believing that everything would be better in

¹ 1. Not to kill but to nurture life. 2. Not to steal but to receive what is offered as a gift. 3. Not to misuse sex but to be faithful and caring in intimate relationships. 4. Not to lie but to be truthful. 5. Not to intoxicate with substances or doctrines but to promote clarity and awareness. 6. Not to speak of others’ faults but out of loving-kindness. 7. Not to praise self at the expense of others but to be modest. 8. Not to be possessive of anything but to be generous. 9. Not to harbor anger but to forgive. 10. Not to do anything to diminish the three treasures but to support and nurture it.

our lives if we could progress toward and reach our ideal self or our ideal circumstances. From the Zen point of view, the ideal self is just another constructed delusion that leads to us not being grounded in what we are and where we are right now. Hakuin Zenji stated, “How sad that people ignore the near and search for truth afar, like someone in the midst of water crying out in thirst, like a child of a wealthy home, wandering among the poor” (Hakuin, 1991).

Secular Mindfulness

Kabat-Zinn, one of the founders of the mindfulness-based stress reduction program, stated, “Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally and as open-heartedly as possible” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 108). This definition resonates with the Zen understanding of mindfulness, but the goal is different. Kabat-Zinn began the mindfulness-based stress reduction program in a medical setting to assist patients with stress and pain management issues. The principles have also been adapted into mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, mainly in the treatment of depression. Other well-known therapies that have adapted mindfulness within a psychotherapeutic framework are dialectical behavior therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy. It has also found a place in sports psychology and in life coaching. Numerous studies have demonstrated that mindfulness appears to have been beneficial to many of the recipients of these training programs and psychotherapies. In contrast to Zen, they do not aspire to spiritual insight. Their stated goals are to help relieve people of psychological disorders or manage physical pain. Kabat-Zinn (2005) described the general reasons why people came to his clinic:

They came because they wanted to take charge in their own lives and get off their pain medication or their antianxiety medication and not to be as they often said “so nervous and uptight.” People came to the clinic because they had heart disease and cancer and chronic pain conditions, and a host of other medical problems that were having an untoward influence on their lives and their freedom to pursue their dreams. (p. 140)

Mindfulness-based research demonstrates that it is effective as a treatment because it reduces stress, develops better emotional regulation, and increases distress tolerance. It stands in contrast to more traditional psychotherapies like psychoanalysis or cognitive behavioral therapy in that it is not focused so much on understanding how past experiences have caused current distress or changing a dysfunctional way of thinking but, rather, on learning not to overidentify with thoughts and emotions and to simply observe them and let them come and go or let them be—in other words, to think less and engage in embodied present-moment experience more. This is moving in the same direction as Zen practice, but it doesn’t take it as far as the Zen spiritual insight model.

Secular mindfulness also works in a different context than the spiritual/religious setting of Zen. It is, by its secular nature, based on principles of scientific research rather than subjective personal insight. It is required to be an evidence-based method and required to achieve positive outcomes for patients and clients that will improve their sense of well-being, in return for a professional fee for service. Hence, there is more pressure for attainment of results in secular mindfulness in contrast to the more spacious, non-striving approach of nonattainment in Zen.

This has led to some significant distortions about the positive benefits of mindfulness. In the enthusiasm to promote secular mindfulness, regretfully, it has been oversold as a

panacea for just about every ill in the world. I believe this has been driven by the profit motive, naïve enthusiasm, and professional hubris. After a few decades of unconditional universal acclaim, its research methods and exaggerated claims are now being appropriately challenged, and it is being viewed with much more discernment.

I have also noticed over the years, since mindfulness became popularized, that clients coming to see me for counseling and psychotherapy have frequently come with the view, based on their previous exposure to mindfulness training, that it was going to make them feel good relatively quickly. Generally speaking, they reported that after an initial honeymoon period of mindfulness training, they became frustrated or disappointed with its results, and the drop-out rate of doing regular daily practice seems to be quite high. Perhaps this comes from a profound misunderstanding of the nature of mindfulness practice that has been distorted by secular pressures.

A Zen Critique of Secular Mindfulness in a Clinical Context

Authentic Mindfulness Is a Confronting Experience

In the clamor to promote mindfulness as a key to happiness and a cure for almost every ill, what has been left unspoken about it, and not clearly understood, is that like psychotherapy, mindfulness is an uncovering process. If you practice mindfulness of thoughts and feelings and body sensations in a sustained way, you will eventually uncover unpleasant truths about yourself and your character. In Zen, practicing mindfulness has been likened to holding up a mirror to your own experience of life. It is true, as is stated in the secular definitions of mindfulness, that a mirror is nonjudgmental. But a mirror also does not distort what is there in front of it to fit into an idealized image of oneself. If you practice mindful meditation long enough with the intention of self-honesty as well as self-compassion, you will uncover aspects of yourself that are likely to be resentful, narrow-minded, petty, mean, and self-serving—to name just a few characteristics. When people in my Zen group tell me about these experiences in personal interviews, I congratulate them on their practice deepening and normalize the experience. Yet in clinical and secular mindfulness, there is often no framework to understand these unpleasant truths that arise. The reactions to these experiences can go in various directions.

Like a romantic relationship, many people give up mindfulness practice after the initial honeymoon period has worn off, and the dissatisfied self with all its problems and limitations starts to emerge. Another reaction is to spiral down into toxic shame when we meet these unpleasant aspects of ourselves. This can arise with people who have very harsh religious or family backgrounds or who have been the subject of shame-based abuse and neglect. Another reaction is to keep ignoring these narcissistic and unpleasant aspects of ourselves and pretend that they are not happening. The capacity that human beings have for denial is extremely tenacious. Instead of being able to acknowledge the signs of egocentricity in ourselves, we may just dismiss them as symptoms of being overcritical of ourselves and having low self-esteem.

In a Zen group, what is established in the *dharma* talks and readings is that it is in the human condition to be egocentric, and this is the place we start from to acknowledge our flawed humanity. When we are practicing in a context where this is normalized, we can see these unpleasant truths are not just personal but affect everyone. I recall the words of my first teacher, Kobori Roshi, who said, “When you do meditation, you dig up the ground and then all of the worms come to the surface” (personal communication, 1976).

Another aspect of mindfulness meditation that can arise, even from daily practice, not just in an intensive retreat, is the experience of nihilism—existential meaninglessness. St. John of the Cross referred to this common religious experience as “the dark night of the soul” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, n.d.). It has its parallels in Zen training, where monks refer to themselves as being like dead logs. Even half an hour of mindful meditation can make us acutely aware that everything is passing away and there is nothing we can hold on to. Beliefs, thoughts, and philosophical views that we have invested in for many years do not seem quite as real and solid as they used to. Questions such as “Who am I?” start to emerge. Sometimes we can feel like we have lost our bearings. Ultimately, Zen practitioners learn to embrace and enjoy this emerging sense of emptiness, but at first it may be disconcerting. This is where it is important that mindfulness meditators can be part of a community—a teacher and/or a group that understands these issues from their own experience and who can share them compassionately with those who are less experienced to guide them through the territory. From my experience, psychotherapists, counselors, and life coaches who do not have a substantial personal grounding in mindfulness training do not seem to have an understanding of these existential issues that may arise and, hence, have no way of dealing with them in their clients.

I am emphasizing the dark side of meditation here and not the bright because it is the dark side that is not spoken of enough. However, to give voice to the bright side of meditation, it is indeed joyful and satisfying to bring the light of awareness to the whole of our experience—but from a Zen perspective, it is not just being aware of ourselves. It is being aware of the largeness of life.

In summary, mindfulness in meditation and everyday life requires both self-compassion and self-honesty, not one or the other. It is a journey of courage and sincerity as well as of kindness. The supportive, nonjudgmental, and self-compassion aspects have been emphasized in secular mindfulness because positive marketing works. The challenging self-honesty aspects have been ignored because they do not sell well in a marketplace that panders to narcissism.

Clinical Vignette

This case study aims to demonstrate how mindfulness may be used in a clinical setting where it is not just reduced to a technique that will make you feel good but where there is a deeper understanding of its potency as well as its difficulties and it is integrated into a psychotherapeutic framework. Louise was a 45-year-old woman who came to see me to deal with panic attacks, generally high levels of anxiety, and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. She had been married for 25 years and was in a stable, caring relationship with her husband and two adult children. The relevant details of her developmental history are that she was the youngest of three children, her mother suffered from depression, and Louise experienced her mother as distant and distracted. Her father was away from the family home most of the time working and was not engaged in parenting. From an early age, she became a rebellious child, always getting into trouble and taking risks. At the age of 15, she was gang raped. She never told anyone about it until she was in her thirties because she thought that she would be blamed for her risk-taking behavior.

It was only in her early forties that she first sought psychological assistance. She attended a psychoeducational workshop at a psychiatric hospital, and said she came to finally understand her high levels of depression, anxiety, and feelings of dissociation as symptomatic of PTSD, arising from her sexual assault as a teenager. She then followed it up with group therapy at the same hospital but became retraumatized as she felt that she

was pressured into processing the rape trauma in a way she was not ready for. She said it felt like being raped all over again. She then developed panic attacks along with her other symptoms and saw a clinical psychologist who provided mindfulness-based interventions. She terminated these sessions after about six visits because she said she found them unhelpful and it distressed her.

She told me that the psychologist had a qualification in mindfulness-based training but taught it by reading instructions from a manual and didn't deviate from following it in a methodical, psychoeducational, step-by-step manner. She had been told by the psychologist that practicing mindfulness would make her feel better but found that when she did it in the therapy sessions, she felt overwhelmingly sad and empty. The psychologist responded to this not by exploring the sadness and feelings of emptiness but by continually going back to the beginning of the manual and methodically going through the steps again.

When Louise began to see me, I was particularly careful not to replicate the therapeutic errors of the past therapies by making sure that any interventions I introduced were with her full understanding and agreement and that she could say no to them at any point in the therapy. After establishing a trusting relationship, we agreed to try eye movement desensitization and reprocessing to help resolve the rape trauma memories. It seemed to have an initial positive effect but in time did not seem to resolve her issues.

We then revisited mindfulness as a way of helping her. She had been continuing to listen to a body scan relaxation recording once a day but could not tolerate silent meditation, particularly by herself. We started doing 5 min together in the therapy room and then eliciting her experience. She said she felt safer when she was doing it with me in the room but felt a great unease in doing it on her own. Sometimes she would feel calm, and often it would elicit the same feelings of emptiness and sadness. We came to an understanding that she had been pushing these feelings down for most of her life and had a deep fear and aversion to them. I normalized these feelings for her and explained that mindfulness can be a challenging, unpleasant experience to begin with as it uncovers what is there beneath the surface and doesn't always make you feel good. This helped to hold her in the therapeutic process.

As we explored her negative feelings further, it became clearer that she had very little capacity to hold her feelings with compassion and nonjudgment. Her inner critic told her that she was a failure at mindfulness. Neither could she implement self-compassion as a way of learning how to hold herself when she was simply instructed and encouraged to do so. I then came up with an intervention that appeared to make a difference. If she didn't have the inner resources of self-compassion, then perhaps they could be imported from the outside. With her husband's consent, we set up hugging sessions at home of 20-min durations, outside of their sexual relationship, that they would engage in a few times a week, during which Louise would just be held lovingly by her husband. She reported that she felt very nurtured by these sessions and looked forward to them. My sense was that Louise had an insecure attachment through her early experiences with her depressed mother and didn't have the inner resources to hold herself in life generally, or in meditation, when negative experiences arose. The therapeutic intention was that she would be able to regrow a more secure attachment style through a tactile engagement with her husband that was nonsexual.

After the introduction of these hugging sessions with her husband, further brief periods of silent meditation with me in the therapy room, and exploration of the negative feelings that came up, the panic attacks started to reduce in frequency and intensity. She reported having fleeting feelings of joy and a budding outlook that the future would be okay. The

panic attacks then stopped altogether, and she reassessed whether she wanted to continue with therapy. She was given every opportunity to end therapy at this point if she wished to, but she decided to continue to consolidate her newfound stability and to grow a more positive sense of being in the world.

A Zen Critique of Secular Mindfulness in the Wider Social Context

Secular Mindfulness in a Culture of Narcissism

Mindfulness in Buddhism is practiced to deconstruct the ego. In other words, it leads to the death of narcissism and the birth of altruism. Narcissism has always existed. It is not something new. Other world religions, such as Christianity, have also challenged narcissistic attitudes and behaviors. However, as Christopher Lasch pointed out in his landmark book of the 1970s, *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1979), it is rapidly on the rise in Western civilization, to the point where it is now being described by contemporary writers on the subject, such as Twenge and Campbell in their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). This is the contemporary social milieu in which mindfulness is now being taught and promoted.

To critics such as Joiner, secular mindfulness has become too inward looking and, therefore, reinforces the sense of egoistic self and indulges narcissistic tendencies. He opens his book with the following words:

The tale to be told in these pages is of a noble and useful idea—mindfulness—sullied by a culture of superficiality, mediocrity, and especially selfishness. Although there are various definitions of mindfulness, a workable one is the non-judgmental awareness of the richness, subtlety, and variety of the present moment—importantly, all of the present moment, not just the self. (Joiner, 2017, p. 1)

It is also important that we remind ourselves as psychologists that narcissism is not benign or amusing. Out of view behind the happy social media images and the celebrity culture of perfect self-assured beauty and self-love lays the dark side—the lifelong scars of self-harm and the tragedy of suicide for those who have “failed” to live up to their impossibly perfect self-image. Let us remember that the original Narcissus in the Greek myth died from being self-obsessed. My personal view is that the narcissism epidemic is also behind the growing trend toward depression, anxiety, and high rates of relationship breakdown that we find in Western culture.

Idealists may wish to claim that mindfulness can transform narcissism and that it is, in fact, the antidote we need in modern culture. However, my concern is, along with Joiner, that the reverse seems to be true and that authentic mindfulness is being corrupted by a narcissistic culture to suit its own ends. If it were practiced along with precepts of nonviolence and nonegotism, it would have an entirely different aspiration.

When experienced Zen practitioners look back on years of training, they see more clearly how their self-centered fantasy world programmed the way they lived their life. They experience shock at how deceptive it was. They didn’t even think they were narcissistic; that label only referred to other difficult people. But it slowly dawns on the sincere Zen student that descriptions of narcissism fit themselves and not just others. They also experience, despite the budding openings of kensho, how quickly the ego can ascend the throne again.

It is a complete misunderstanding of Zen to consider that absorption in meditation (or naval gazing as it is pejoratively known) is synonymous with the self-absorption of

narcissism. Rather, if one looks long enough and deeply enough into the inner space of one's subjective experience, and does not just ruminate on the surface image, it is a very humbling experience. Interestingly, the word humility is derived from the Latin word *humus*, as in soil or earth. The meaning of being humble, or having humility, is to be down to earth. The narcissist has a fear and loathing of humility because it will mean they are no longer special, but the mature Zen practitioner realizes that being down to earth is the most comfortable place to be and experiences a quiet confidence that has no need to shout its name. It is regretful that secular mindfulness, when it is influenced by narcissistic attitudes, overfocuses on self-well-being at the expense of underfocusing on how we relate mindfully to others and, therefore, does not recognize the importance that healthy relationships have on our sense of mutual well-being and inner peace.

The Commercialization of Mindfulness

According to [Doran \(2018\)](#),

Mindfulness is big business, worth in excess of US\$1.0 billion in the US alone and linked—somewhat paradoxically—to an expanding range of must have products. These include downloadable apps (1300 at the last count), books to read or color in, and online courses. Mindfulness practice and training is now part of a global wellness industry worth trillions of dollars.

It is in the nature of any commercial transaction that there is a product or a service to sell. How, then, do you sell something as ephemeral as mindfulness—the act of remembering to return to the present moment? Let's first look at the products—the proliferation of mindfulness apps and other paraphernalia such as mindfulness coloring books. Are they beneficial? Are they benign? Are they a waste of money?

First, in exploring these questions, we could liken mindfulness to learning how to swim. We take our first baby steps by becoming used to being in the water knee deep in the shallow end of the pool and then training with floaters. It would only be when a person could swim unaided that they could then legitimately claim that they have learned how to swim in a rudimentary way. If we apply this analogy to mindfulness, then mindfulness coloring books would be the equivalent of splashing around in the shallow end of the pool. Mindfulness apps would be the equivalent of using floaters. But we would not seriously consider that someone has learned how to swim if they could not do it unaided, and someone could not seriously demonstrate that they have mastered mindfulness in a rudimentary way unless they could do it by themselves.

The technique of marketing is to delude or convince potential customers into believing that they need the product on sale. Mindfulness apps have deluded millions of customers into believing they need them to be able to practice mindfulness effectively. They may be useful in the beginning, just like floaters are in learning how to swim, but they create a dependency and a delusion that you will always need them. Mindfulness has been likened to developing an inner mental muscle that brings you back to the moment. Resilience only really develops from exercising this inner mental muscle. If we continually depend on an app to guide us, we have not really developed this internal locus of control.

A problem lies in the branding. If mindfulness apps and mindfulness coloring books were rebranded as relaxation apps or relaxation coloring books, I personally wouldn't have a problem with them. But when they are intentionally branded as mindfulness, they convey something much more substantial than mere relaxation. The term mindfulness, when applied to these products, conveys all the spiritual richness and the scientific

evidence-based health benefits that arise from sustained attention to the present moment, when it is highly questionable that they do. However, it benefits the producers and marketers because it increases their profits.

By contrast, millions of people in Buddhist countries alone have learned mindfulness with some basic guided verbal instructions and support from communal practice before modern technology became available. It was never originally intended in Buddhism that the prompt to practice mindfulness would come from an outside source; rather, it came from within. When we rely on a mindfulness app, there is always a verbal instruction that acts as a barrier between our subjective experience and the vitality of the present moment. The verbal instruction becomes the focus, not the delight in the sound of the kookaburra or the delight in silence.

Mindfulness in Corporations

Regarding the selling of services, this comes in the form of providing mindfulness training to employees of various commercial corporations and government departments to enhance mental health and help meet key performance indicators. Zen friends of mine who provide leadership training and life coaching to various corporate organizations tell me about some of the ethical dilemmas they face when asked to provide mindfulness training in these organizations. They tell me that many employees are basically coerced into doing it. It is not overt coercion, but there would be definite consequences for their career if they refused to do the training. The training often takes the form of managers learning in a day workshop how to practice everyday mindfulness and how to meditate, and then they are expected to repeat the instructions on to their subordinates. Not only is the training inadequate, but you also cannot mandate that people practice mindfulness, no matter how beneficial it may be. It needs to be a personal decision that comes from within.

The Japanese government made Zen training compulsory for factory workers during the Second World War to coerce them into producing more efficiently. I view this as a violation of human dignity. There is a fine line between encouragement and coercion in the corporate sector. Despite the widespread popularity of Zen in the West, it is not very popular in Japan now, and perhaps this is because its original freshness has been soured by these ham-fisted attempts to force people into doing something that will be good for them. There is a salutary lesson in this for secular mindfulness in the corporate sphere.

Zen, by contrast, in its native spiritual/religious context, operates in a very different way to mindfulness training that is provided by health professionals or life coaches. In secular mindfulness, the transaction is primarily limited and commercial, and the relationship ceases when the commercial and professional transaction is completed. Zen, on the other hand, as a spiritual tradition and institution, as well as offering infrastructure in the form of temples or meditation centers in which to practice, also provides meaningful forms for practice that are embedded in ceremony and rituals; structures and timetables for self-discipline that keep everyone on task; as well as an ongoing practice community that cultivates deep bonds of lifelong friendship and mutual support. It essentially operates along nonprofit lines. While secular mindfulness is based on a culture of individualism, Zen Buddhist mindfulness is based on a culture of community. Like many of my Buddhist friends and colleagues, I sometimes feel annoyed that our spiritual practice has been corrupted by the shallow commercialization of mindfulness, but in my deeper reflections, I just feel saddened that the richness of this age-old practice has been compromised and that people will not get its full value.

Who Is the Authority on Mindfulness Now?

It is important as a Zen practitioner to honestly examine one's reactions to life events and consider whether they are appropriate or whether they are just ego reactions to aggrandize and defend one's own status and identity. It has, therefore, been important for me personally to examine my reactions to the rise and popularity of secular mindfulness. On the one hand, it has been validating of my own life choices to see that the meditation practice I took up many years ago, before mindfulness was popularized, was a good choice that has had a lot of mental and physical health benefits. Looking back on my adolescence and early adulthood, I realize now that I suffered from depression. Ever since I took up meditation practice, it went away and never really returned. I became more confident in a grounded kind of way. It is also wonderful to see other people benefiting from this practice now that it has become mainstream and that many others have the chance of experiencing the same mental health that I have enjoyed.

However, there is something that rests uneasily about the popularization of secular mindfulness within myself and many of my Buddhist friends and colleagues. We often refer to it as "Buddhism light." Does it rest uneasily because those with less personal commitment and experience have usurped our status as an authority on mindfulness? Does it rest uneasily when psychologists or counselors or even nonprofessional people set themselves up as mindfulness meditation teachers when Buddhist practitioners have held themselves back from teaching until they have had decades of experience behind them?

Does it rest uneasily because we are envious of neuroscientists who have developed a whole different terminology and understanding to explain what happens to the brain during mindfulness practice that we do not understand fully? Does it rest uneasily because others are making huge profits out of mindfulness when many of us have offered our teaching for nonprofit? These are important questions to ask, and it is important to acknowledge these reactions when they arise and notice one's own Buddhist-held attachments. However, the disquiet also comes from a deeper place. It is similar to the disquiet that practicing Christians feel about the commercialization of Christmas. Yes, it is wonderful that it has become a time for family reunion and the giving of gifts to demonstrate one's love and friendship for others. But behind the scenes, it is manipulated by advertising and the profit motive. To Christians, the original meaning of Christmas as the celebration of the birth of Christ and his teachings of altruism has been lost in popular culture, and the sacred has become the profane.

It may be useful for mindfulness entrepreneurs, trainers of secular mindfulness programs, as well as their trainees, to ask themselves similar searching questions. For example, do I promote or teach mindfulness primarily for commercial gain or for professional and career status? Do I have enough personal experience and personal maturity to teach it?

In Zen, the authority to teach, called *Dharma Transmission*, is only given from teacher to apprentice, in the same way that a psychologist can only be authorized to practice by another psychologist who is personally qualified to test and assess a trainee's level of skill and experience. The endorsement to teach in Zen is not decided by democratic election, although a meditation community, or *sangha*, may decide who they want as a teacher. Most importantly, just as in the world of professional qualifications, it is not decided by one's own choosing or by personal ambition. By contrast, I believe a lack of standards does exist in secular mindfulness. Anyone can claim to have an authority to teach mindfulness with minimal training or even without any training at all.

In my own training as a Zen student, I have estimated that I attended about 60 intensive meditation retreats of 1-week duration, well over 100 one-day and two-day retreats, as well as regular daily practice before I became an apprentice Zen teacher. I then received ongoing supervision for several years before I became fully qualified. I continue to practice with the same regularity. There is nothing unusual in my training. All the Zen teachers I know personally would have undertaken a similar level of training. We all began teaching in about our forties or fifties.

Trainers of secular mindfulness would perhaps argue that such extensive training is not required in a clinical context, or in a life coaching, that doesn't aspire to spiritual insight but simply aspires to providing mindfulness-based interventions for psychological problems. This may be a valid argument, but I believe the standards required for secular mindfulness trainer qualifications are nevertheless too low. For example, it is advertised that psychologists and other health professionals can become certified mindfulness practitioners by attending three 3-day workshops. Additionally, they can become a master practitioner by attending an additional two 5-day retreats (InPsych, 2019, p. 56). If we were to compare this with the training to become, for example, a psychoanalytic therapist, it could take 3 to 5 years of training and supervision that could also include undergoing one's own long-term psychotherapy. Imagine if someone claimed that the only real therapeutic value of psychoanalytic therapy was the skill of active listening. Imagine if they then provided brief workshops to teach it and then claimed its trainees had mastered psychoanalytic therapy. I would imagine fully qualified psychoanalytic therapists would challenge this.

In the same way, taking mindfulness out of Buddhist psychology and claiming mastery of it in a few brief workshops and retreats is an equivalent dumbing down. Mindfulness is a skill that is transferred by example, not just conveyed through words. This is the same distinction that exists between psychotherapy and psychoeducation. It is the relationship that heals, not just a set of techniques or intellectual information—and a healing relationship is one that is provided by a therapist of maturity and compassion.

Conclusion

Zen Buddhism is a 2,500-year-old tradition. Secular mindfulness has been around for about 40 years. In my mind, it is like an adolescent that thinks it knows everything and, indeed, certainly believes it knows more than its parent. It reminds me of a well-known Zen story that is worth ending on:

A Zen priest once received a university professor who came to enquire about Zen. The Zen priest poured his visitor's cup and kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," the priest said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?" (Reps, 1961, p. 5)

Like the professor, secular mindfulness has become too full of academic opinions, too full of quick-fix solutions, and too full of self-gain to understand the simplicity of an empty mind.

References

- Austin, J. H. (1998). *Zen and the brain*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7347.001.0001>

- Dogen, E. (1985). *Moon in dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (T. Kazuaki, Trans.). Berkeley, CA: North Point Press.
- Doran, P. (2018). McMindfulness: Buddhism as sold to you by the neoliberals. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/mcmindfulness-buddhism-as-sold-to-you-by-neoliberals-88338>
- Fischer, N. (2011). 16 Bodhisattva precepts and their history. Retrieved from <http://dharmawithoutborders.blogspot.com/2011/04/16-bodhisattva-precepts-and-their.html>
- Hakuin. (1991). Song of Zazen (R. Aitken, Trans.). Retrieved from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/daily-ze.txt>
- Hanh, T. N. (1991). *The miracle of mindfulness*. London, England: Random House. (Original work published 1976)
- InPsych. (2019). *Bulletin of the Australian Psychological Society*, 41(2), Melbourne, Australia: Australian Psychological Society.
- Dark night of the soul. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.jesus-passion.com/DarkNightSoul.htm>
- Joiner, T. (2017). *Mindlessness: The corruption of mindfulness in a culture of narcissism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Coming to our senses: Healing ourselves and the world through mindfulness*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Mumon. (1991). *The gateless barrier: The Wu-men kuan (Mumonkan)*. (R. Aitken, Trans.). New York, NY: North Point Press.
- Port, D. (2009). Fishing with a straight hook. Retrieved from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/wildfoxzen/2009/11/fishing-with-a-straight-hook.html>
- Reps, P. (1961). *Zen flesh, Zen bones: A collection of Zen and pre-Zen writings*. New York, NY: Double Day Anchor.
- Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2009). *The narcissism epidemic*. New York, NY: Atria.

Author Note

Geoff Dawson is a registered psychologist in private practice in Australia. He is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and a founding member of the Australian Association of Buddhist Counselors and Psychotherapists. He is also a Zen Buddhist teacher and trained under Nanrei Kobori Roshi, Robert Aitken Roshi, and Charlotte Joko Beck. He is the teacher of the Ordinary Mind Zen School Sydney and Melbourne and was given formal permission to teach by Charlotte Joko Beck.

Received August 12, 2019

Revision received January 10, 2020

Accepted January 21, 2020 ■